

September 8, 2003

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Principi:

Thank you for providing the opportunity to submit comments for submission to the record for the September 10, 2003 Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Commission hearing for Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 8. As the veteran population is aging, requires even more help, and as demographic patterns show more veterans moving to the Sunbelt, it is critical that we examine both physical and manpower resources. My comments specific to my congressional district are as follows:

Campus Realignment/Consolidation of Services

- I would support initiatives to transfer current inpatient surgery and/or medicine services from Lake City VA to the Gainesville Malcolm Randall Veterans Affairs Medical Center following completion of the new bed tower at Gainesville. It would concern me if patients were diverted to Gainesville before sufficient capacity is ensured. Similarly, I support new construction for psychiatric service at Gainesville.
- I will follow with interest site selection of 4 new Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC's) in the North market.

Collaborations

- I would certainly encourage VA to collaborate both with Department of Defense (DoD) in establishing inpatient joint venture with Jacksonville Navy Hospital. I have encouraged such economies of resource-sharing for years on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.
- Also to be promoted is the recommendation to put a small Veterans' Benefits Administration (VBA) office in the Jacksonville OPC.
- I would like to be provided with more information on National Cemetery Administration (NCA) mention of "Gainesville as an identification of areas they would like to expand." I am not familiar with this proposal, if you would be so kind as to further inform me.

The Honorable Anthony J. Principi, Jr.

Page 2

- Finally, while it is not yet relevant and thus not addressed in the CARES recommendations, I expect that VA will follow passage of HR 1565, establishing five new VA cemeteries. Insofar as this bill contained my HR 196, establishing a new VA cemetery in the Jacksonville area, Senate-passage and the President's signing of the bill into public law would create a new opportunity for NCA in this area within a few years.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute, and I will remain engaged as the CARES recommendations proceed this fall.

Sincerely,

Cliff Stearns
United States Representative

CS:les

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0907

September 15, 2003

Mr. Richard E. Larson
Director
CARES Commission
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Richard:

I am pleased to express my continued support for the Veterans Administration (VA) and the initiative to establish an inpatient health care facility for our aging veterans residing within the East Central Florida region.

One of my top priorities in Congress has been to improve veterans' access to quality health care services and affordable prescription medication. Despite best efforts by the VA to provide comprehensive health care services to aging veterans on a timely and convenient manner, veterans in the East Central Florida region are faced with long wait times and inadequate access to VA medical resources.

Many veterans are forced to travel to distant VA facilities to receive specialized care and rehabilitation treatment services. Eligible United States veterans suffering from critical health ailments should not be forced to wait or travel inordinate distances for medical services that they are entitled to receive.

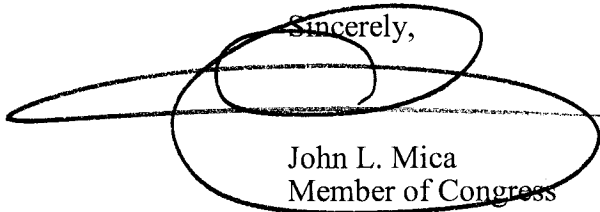
A dedicated inpatient medical facility capable of servicing the needs of the growing number of individuals seeking geriatric and long term care and treatment is also needed. East Central Florida leads the nation in the ratio of veterans residing in an area without a VA inpatient facility suited for extensive specialized care. This is unacceptable.

While some progress has been made in the State of Florida to address the scarcity of long term and specialized care services, now is an opportune time for East Central Florida veterans to finally have immediate access to an inpatient facility capable of providing comprehensive health care services that they deserve.

I am pleased to express my support for any viable and timely initiative that will provide quality VA inpatient health care in East Central Florida. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my Legislative Assistant, Joshua J. Gaboton, in my Washington Office at (202) 225-4035, if I can further assist in this important matter.

With my regards and best wishes, I remain

Sincerely,



John L. Mica
Member of Congress

JLM:jjg

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
Congresswoman Ginny Brown-Waite
Department of Veterans Affairs
CARES Commission
VISN 8
2003 Public Hearing, Sept 10, 2003

Mr. Chairman and Members of the CARES Commission:

In December 2002, The Honorable Anthony J. Principi established the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Commission in order to review and provide an objective, independent analysis of the draft national plan. It is the goal of the CARES process to improve healthcare delivery to our nation's veterans taking into account new demographic trends and the resources of the VA. I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the CARES process and to offer my input for consideration by the CARES Commission.

As a member of the House Veterans' Affairs committee, I am well aware of the challenges that the VA faces in providing healthcare to a growing number of veterans enrolled in the system. Indeed, improvement in Veterans' Health Care Services is one of my highest legislative priorities.

As you know, Florida is a national leader for veterans' population growth and the 5th Congressional District, which I have the privilege to represent, has the 3rd highest veterans' population in the nation.

West Central Florida is currently experiencing exponential growth. Over the next ten years, Sumter County alone is scheduled to have over 100,000 new residents based on already approved subdivisions. Similar development approvals exist in Lake, Marion, and Citrus County. Common sense tells us that a large number of these new residents, in addition to the current population, will be veterans in need of VA Healthcare benefits.

Not only do we expect exponential growth over the next ten years, but those veterans who currently live in my district are waiting excessively long times. Several veterans have told me they have had to wait over 18 months to receive care. I am sure we can all agree that this is unacceptable. I recognize that some efforts have been made to lessen the wait times but certainly additional facilities would help alleviate this situation.

I am encouraged that the draft national plan anticipates construction of a new VA Hospital in Orlando, Florida. This will provide relief to the currently overburdened Gainesville Hospital and a much needed resource for veterans of central Florida. I support this initiative.

Additionally, I approve of VA Health Under Secretary Roswell's decision to not reduce the hours of operation at the Lake City Hospital. Such a move would have harmed veterans in the northern part of my district as well as many veterans in North Florida and Southern Georgia.

I am also pleased to note the VISN 8 Market Plan anticipates a new multi-specialty Outpatient Clinic in south Marion County to serve as a referral site for patients treated at the Ocala and Leesburg Clinic. I welcome the enhanced access and care this facility will provide.

Despite the positive recommendations stated above, I still cannot fully endorse this Market Plan.

Mr. Chairman, I am disturbed by the decision to not include in the draft national plan the construction of an outpatient facility in Sumter County. As you may be aware, Mr. Gary Morse, the President and CEO of *The Villages*, a large and expanding retirement community in my district, has offered to construct a veterans' healthcare facility, based on VA specifications in Sumter County. Mr. Morse is willing to lease this facility on a long term basis to the VA for \$1.00 a year. This is a million dollar "gift" which Mr. Morse is offering to serve veterans from Sumter, Citrus, Lake, and Marion Counties.

As a public official, I am sure you can appreciate that this is an offer that should not be ignored. It would be a mutually beneficial agreement and a great public/private partnership which substantially saves tax dollars.

While I am well aware that the costs involved in opening a new facility may equal allocations for construction, I must stress that with some collaboration between parties involved, the VA could provide healthcare to a concentrated veterans' population with lower than average cost incurred. At a time of budget shortfalls, this is a great way to save tax dollars while meeting the ever growing needs of Florida's veterans.

Given the rapid growth of my district and the needs of veterans who are currently suffering under interminable waits, I strongly urge you to give this offer due consideration when making your final determinations.

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to express my views on this important subject.